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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: EDUCATION IN THE FN-HELD NORTH

REF: ABIDJAN 1314

Classified By: Economic Officer Erfana Dar for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (U) Summary: The efforts to administer the New Forces (NF)-held north by the Ministry of Education are viewed by the FN and academics in the region with suspicion bordering on contempt. EconOfficers visited Bouake and Korhogo, and found that the ongoing public primary school teacher's strike (reftel) is a secondary issue to the more central concern over which teachers to employ in the FN-held north. At the heart of the dispute is the question of how to integrate 1,951 volunteer teachers who have worked in the FN-held north since 2002 into the government-administered educational system. In recognition of their service since 2002 and as a means of compromise, the Minister of Education promised to hire the volunteers as fully-employed faculty. However, he then proceeded to send approximately 4000 teachers from the government-controlled south, most with the minimal certification required, to instead replace the volunteer teachers who had been previously promised employment. The teachers sent from the south were accused of being Young Patriot spies by both the New Forces (FN) and their allies among the volunteer teachers in the FN-held north, and were forced to leave. The current situation has left a vacuum in a system already weakened by the ongoing primary school strike. Partially as a result, many parents who are willing to send their children to school are turning to a flourishing madrassa system, where payment is flexible and schools reinforce the Islamic culture which is much more present in the FN-held north than the government-controlled south. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Background: In mid-2006, Minister of National Education Michel Amani N,Guessan (FPI) had promised to hire 1,951 volunteer teachers who had taught in schools in FN-held territory and were paid by funds raised by parents of students, as teachers were not receiving regular salaries due to the split of the nation in 2002. However, in an about-face, he then sent teachers from the government-controlled south exclusively; teachers who had lesser qualifications (a basic three month training course offered in Abidjan). Despite a Prime Minister-led Council of Government held on November 29, the issue was not resolved at the time of EconOff's visit in mid-December, and as of today is still at an impasse.

¶3. (U) In EconOff meetings with the New Forces and Ecole Pour Tous (and educational group comprised of professors and teachers and primarily funded by USG Democracy and Human Rights Funds) in the FN-held north, the issue of employment for the 1,951 volunteer teachers was stressed even more than the volatile issue of the teachers being sent from the south. Both the FN psuedo-Ministry of Education and the Ecole Pour Tous viewed this move by the Minister of Education as further proof that the Gbagbo government is not keen on actual integration, but instead is using the unstable political times to further their own political agenda. According to both groups, "the Ministry of Education does not wish to see

schools function in the (FN-held) north." They also said that during the crisis, the Ministry of Education used its authority to continue the war against the FN through administrative means by refusing to pay those teachers who stayed. These groups said that while the Minister agreed to hire the volunteer teachers and presented himself as willing to acknowledge the de-facto system administered since 2002, they observed that in reality he wanted no such thing.

¶4. (U) In Korhogo, the situation falls along slightly different lines. Madame Toure, Director of Education in Korhogo for the Ministry of Education, told EconOffs that the conflict with the volunteers does not affect Korhogo as much as it does Bouake, where the majority of the volunteer teachers live and work. In Korhogo, the main issue is the lack of available teachers. In primary schools there is a deficit of 618 teachers; in secondary schools, 184. Commenting on the issue of the volunteer teachers, she said that any qualified teacher should be welcome anywhere in the country. EconOff asked a teacher introduced by Madame Toure during a private meeting why the teachers sent from the government-controlled south instead did not come to Korhogo, where it was clear they were needed even more than in Bouake, and where the issue of the volunteer teachers was not so present. He replied "that makes sense, of course. But that isn't the point anyone is trying to make." According to the source, the administration of the educational system is an extension of political will more than a social necessity, and demonstrates in reality whether the FN or the Gbagbo administration has the power to make decisions.

¶5. (U) Fragility in the North: The educational system in the FN-held north is more fragile than it is in the government-controlled south, primarily due to lack of

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resources among the population and in the educational system itself. While the FN have tried to create an infrastructure in the last four years, it was not until January 2006 that the first exams for secondary school students were held, and the higher failure rate indicates that the quality of available education for the average student has suffered. It was clear to EconOff that the schools are barely functioning with minimal supplies, higher student drop-out rates and fewer working teachers. The strike of the primary public school teachers taken together with the demoralizing blow to the 1,951 volunteer teachers and the educational system in the north at large has taken its toll. The lack of available banks makes being a salaried government employee in the FN-held north exceptionally difficult and even dangerous; without operating financial institutions, teachers must travel several hours south to Yamoussoukro to cash their salary checks (septel). One teacher affiliated with Ecole Pour Tous said, "we haven't had a budget in five years. We don't have a treasury. DDR must happen." He added after a moment, "universities are closed. Primary schools are closed. If the volunteers quit, everything is lost." The Ecole Pour Tous largely sides with the NF and their judgment that sending the teachers from the south was at best an attempt to pawn off sub-standard teachers and at worst, an attempt to smuggle spies from the government-controlled south into the FN-held north.

¶6. (U) Effects in the Fight against Poverty: As a result of the primary school strike and the ongoing volunteer teachers issue and the lack of educational opportunity, many parents cannot afford to continue their children's education. In an area where it can be difficult to persuade villagers to let their kids attend school instead of helping on the family farm, the fight against poverty becomes even more difficult when the schools the families reluctantly sent their children to are now closed for days on end. Since 2002, nearly 50 public primary schools have closed completely. As one ONUCI official succinctly stated "When kids are in school, the situation is easier to stabilize."

17. (C) Madrassas: In both Korhogo and Bouake, the draining effects of a badly-administered educational bureaucracy have encouraged many parents to send their children to private schools, mainly Muslim madrassas that have flourished since the 2002 split of the country. According to the Imam of one of the larger madrassas in Korhogo, prior to 2002 there were an estimated 17 madrassas. Now there are over 50 operating at primary school level. Even though these madrassas are not recognized by either the FN scholastic system or the Ministry of Education (note: some madrassas in the government-controlled south are accredited by the Ministry of Education), families are increasingly willing to send their children to madrassas over public schools. Some madrassas charge each family based on what they can pay depending on that family's income. Payment can be in the form of public service as well. For example, the caretaker of the mosque in one madrassa sends his three sons to the madrassa of that mosque without cash payment. Since labor is much more available than cash, many families prefer the flexibility afforded to them by a madrassa as opposed to a public school. The teachers in these madrassas are from the FN-held north themselves and the madrassas operate in a largely Islamic environment. Madrassa teachers are Ivorian and go on to receive further education elsewhere in Africa. EconOff had the opportunity to explore several madrassas and found the Islamic curriculum to be Sunni of the Al-Eh-Hadith school.

18. (C) According to a variety of sources and the lifestyle of the population (for example, classrooms are mixed even past the age of seven, the hijab when worn does not cover the face), there seemed to be little presence of Wahaabi teaching and doctrine. According a teacher in Korhogo, students leave at the secondary school level to pursue Islamic studies elsewhere, such as Mali or Mauritania, and return to become part of the agrarian or merchant community. The biggest controversy surrounding the growth of the madrassas is the criticism that the schools do not teach life-skills. As such, few graduates from these primary schools go on to pursue mainstream professions, and increasingly come back either as madrassa teachers or merchants. When asked, imams in many mosques visited by EconOff claimed not to be financed by foreign governments and are run on independent donations. The apparent condition of mosques and schools seemed to corroborate this. While the mosques may have been built with foreign assistance at one time, by their appearance and condition it is obvious the Imams and communities do not have the money to maintain them as they would like.

19. (C) Comment: The unfortunate combination of the strike of primary public school teachers and the Minister of Education's move that infuriated the volunteer teachers and the NF has dealt a hard blow to an already weakened educational system. School attendance rates have suffered

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and educational achievement has slid. The lack of banking institutions in the rebel-held north exacerbates the problem as it does all efforts to reintegrate the national administration. The rapid growth of private madrasas is due in large measure to the loss of confidence in the educational system and lack of resources many Muslim families in the north experience on a daily basis. This issue, which is a central concern in the FN-held north but escapes most press attention in the government-controlled south, simultaneously illustrates the difficulties in reuniting the country and presses the need to do exactly that. End Comment.

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